

# The Electoral Cost of Committee Chairs in a Post-Seniority Era

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## ABSTRACT

Ryan Thomas Freeman: The Electoral Cost of Committee Chairs in a Post-Seniority Era  
(Under the direction of Jason Roberts)

The role of seniority in the Congresses of the twentieth century has been well documented by congressional scholars and political observers alike. For most of that century seniority was akin to power. However, over the course of the last twenty-five years we have observed the weakening of the institution of seniority. One area where this weakening is especially apparent is in the selection of committee chairs. Historically committee chairs were selected on the basis of their seniority. Following the Republican takeover of the House in 1994, party leadership began assigning committee chairs to committee members who demonstrated loyalty to the party. Drawing on elections literature that finds linkages between the partisan loyalty of a member and a decrease in electoral success I evaluate whether a loyalty-based selection system puts committee chairs at an electoral disadvantage. My results demonstrate that institutional changes designed to induce party loyalty in committee chairs can have adverse effects on the electoral vote share of said chairs. However, I fail to find evidence that committee chairs selected under a loyalty-based selection system do any worse electorally relative to rank-and-file members in similar districts.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .....	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
INTRODUCTION .....	1
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	3
THEORY AND HYPOTHESES.....	6
DATA AND METHODS .....	9
RESULTS .....	11
DISCUSSION.....	20
REFERENCES .....	21

## LIST OF TABLES

1	Electoral Effects of Committee Reform.....	13
2	Committee Chairs and Party Unity .....	15
3	The Electoral Effects from Being a Committee Chair.....	18

## LIST OF FIGURES

1	Electoral Effects of Committee Reform.....	12
2	Committee Chairs and Party Unity .....	16
3	The Electoral Effects from Being a Committee Chair.....	19

## INTRODUCTION

Going into the 2018 midterm elections, Republican members of Congress were faced with the toughest election they had encountered since the red wave swept the country in 2010. An unusually polarizing and unpopular Republican president set the stage for Democrats to make big gains in the House of Representatives. Of those members facing a difficult re-election bid were a group of five committee chairmen. This represented roughly a quarter of all sitting committee chairs. Rather than face re-election, three of those committee chairmen chose instead to retire, two of those three were also at the end of their three term limit. In total Democrats picked up three of those districts, including the seat held by the chairman of the Rules Committee, Pete Sessions, who had decided not to retire.

How is it that the chair of one of the most prestigious committees in Congress could fail to win re-election? The chair of a committee such as the House Committee on Rules wields power that, in theory, should give them every opportunity to stave off a challenger and win the votes of their constituents. I will argue that this is the result of the method that Republican leadership has chosen to use in the allocation of committee chairs.

The textbook congresses of the mid-twentieth century were characterized by powerful and mostly autonomous committee chairs chosen purely on the basis of their seniority within the committee. These chairmen possessed autocratic levels of power over their domains. They were able to act completely independently of the wishes of party leadership and use their power to the fullest extent. It was not until the 1970's that the caucus was able to institute some level of oversight over the chairs, and even then removal of the chair was only used in the most severe cases (Lawrence, 2018).

Following the rise to power of the Republicans in the 104th Congress, the seniority system of nominating committee chairs was abandoned. In place of seniority came the GOP Steering Committee. The Steering Committee consists of party leaders, as well as a selection of other members chosen for regional and seniority reasons (Leighton and Lopez, 2002). Barring a brief

hiatus in the 109th and 110th Congresses, the GOP Steering Committee has been the primary committee chair selection mechanism for Congress from 1995 to present day.

While seniority still plays some role in the nomination decisions of Republican leadership, their *modus operandi* has been to place the most weight on party loyalty and party donations (Deering and Wahlbeck, 2006; Cann, 2008). One of the side-effects of the seniority system was that because the members who had seniority came from districts that were incredibly safe, committee chairs selected due to seniority tended to come from safe districts (Becker and Moscardelli, 2008). Given that Canes-Wrone et al. (2002) and Carson et al. (2010) show that increased party support negatively affects electoral success it could be that by violating the seniority norm in favor of loyalty party leadership is placing the committee chairs, who per Becker and Moscardelli (2008) have lower vote shares than those selected under a system of seniority, in a tough electoral position. In this paper I propose a theory whereby committee chairs selected under a loyalty based selection system are punished electorally relative to members who are situated in similar districts, and also relative to those committee chairs appointed under a seniority system. Significant results here would work towards a broader question of why members seek to become committee chairs given that Volden and Wiseman (2017) find that committee chairs are less effective now than ever before.



## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Electoral Effects of Partisan Voting**

The basis for my theory lies in a few distinct, but related areas of study. Starting with the literature on how roll call votes affect electoral outcomes of members of Congress, it is important to note that this work comes in two forms. The first group of articles attempt to answer the question of whether or not individual roll call votes can change an incumbents vote share, while the second group strives to discover the effects of repeated partisan voting over the course of any given congressional term. While the two areas are related, it is necessary to understand both the micro and macro effects of legislative accountability to bridge the gap between committee chairs and electoral margins.

Observing electoral penalties on individual votes shows that under certain circumstances members are punished for a singular vote. A clear example of this is the Affordable Care Act of 2010, where members of the Democratic party who voted for the bill were viewed as out of step with their constituency. The punishment was severe enough that it could be the reason the Democrats lost control of the House the following midterm (Nyhan et al., 2012). What was it about that one vote that made it so cataclysmic to those members who voted for it? Bovitz and Carson (2006) provide a compelling explanation where the electoral effect of any particular vote can be at least partially explained by how salient a vote is, as well as how controversial and divisive among the majority party that vote is.

If members can be held accountable for an individual vote then it is reasonable to think that they are held accountable for the entirety of their voting record as well. The literature shows that voters do punish their members of Congress for their voting record. Specifically they punish members for partisan voting behavior. Canes-Wrone et al. (2002) find that not only does increased party line voting hurt the vote share of members of Congress during an election, but that it is a substantial enough effect that it lowers the probability of re-election. While Canes-Wrone et al. (2002) only study the effect of partisan voting, Carson et al. (2010) go a step further and argue

that it is not ideology that is punished by voters, but the perceived partisanship that comes with party line voting. With that being said, according to Hollibaugh et al. (2013), the incumbency advantages still matter and the electoral penalty faced by members of Congress for partisan voting behavior is dependent on a challenger who is better representative of the district. While this effect is conditioned on what kind of challenger an incumbent faces, the evidence suggests there is a significantly negative effect on incumbents vote share for supporting their party.

## Parties and Committees

There must be a reason that members of Congress would observe party loyalty even though it is electorally costly, because we see it time and time again. The literature here offers no shortage of explanations. Of specific interest here is the research done on the use of committee assignments and committee chair positions to induce loyalty in members.

In terms of general committee assignments, Leighton and Lopez (2002) find that party loyalty matters when it comes to who gets assigned to what committee. Members with higher loyalty get assigned to more valuable committees as measured by scores derived by Groseclose and Stewart III (1998). This effect is dependent on the conditions of Conditional Party Government being met (Kanthak, 2004; Rohde, 1994). Not only do members with higher loyalty get better assignments, those who face a higher electoral penalty for party loyalty are rewarded even more by the Steering Committee for said loyalty (Leighton and Lopez, 2002). Deering and Smith (1997) push back on these points however, as they claim that the Steering Committees try to give members their preferred assignments. With that said, there are certainly some committees that will be harder to secure a spot on, and in those cases the party rewards loyalty.

Since party loyalty is important to the Steering Committee in regards to the value of the committee that rank-and-file members are assigned to, it stands to reason that this is a pattern we should see repeated in the allocation of the committee chair seats. What we observe is that seniority has indeed been replaced as the primary determinant within the Republican party, and instead the two main factors that best predict whether a member gets a committee chair are party unity on roll call votes and money donated to the party (Deering and Wahlbeck, 2006; Cann, 2008). While seniority still plays a role, that role seems relegated to that of a foot in the door. Deering and Wahlbeck (2006) find that seniority insures an interview with the steering committee but not the

position. Another harder to quantify criteria is posited by Deering and Smith (1997) who claim that committee chairs in the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress were also selected on the basis of the energy they would bring to the job. An interesting caveat within this literature is that seniority still is the deciding factor on constituency-oriented committees (Deering and Smith, 1997).

Members of the Republican party must exhibit party loyalty in the form of money and roll call votes in order to get the position of committee chair, but do they show that same loyalty once appointed or do they use the opportunity to pursue their own policy goals? The literature on this question suggests that members continue to exhibit party loyalty for institutional reasons. Even before the rise of the era of higher partisanship of the 1980's (Lee, 2016), committee chairs began to vote more in line with the party median following the committee reforms of the 1970's which gave the party caucus more control over the approval of committee chairs (Wright, 2000). This suggests that the institutional rules related to the selection of committee chairs can induce loyalty in the behavior of those chairs.

While the changing of rules had an effect on the behavior of committee chairs, increased partisan pressure has had an effect as well. For instance, in the 104th Congress, the Republican leadership did not just monitor committee progress and behavior on legislation but “intervened aggressively” on legislation that was important to the Republican party (Deering and Smith, 1997). The behavior of party leadership is conditioned on the type of messaging surrounding the legislation, with legislation that is a minority party priority receiving the most intrusive action from the majority party (Evans, 2001). However, while these issues that are classified as minority party priorities, or issues that make the minority (majority) party look good (bad), received the most attention from leadership it is still the case the party leadership plays a more involved role in all parts of the committee process now than previously (Evans, 2001).

## THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

The complete autonomy of committee chairs ended around the 94th Congress. At this time, Democratic caucus members moved to make the approval of committee chairs through secret ballot the norm. This was due to frustration among caucus members with respect to the phenomenon of Southern Democrats who did not represent the party holding inordinate amounts of power as committee chairs. The end result was that three Southern Democrat committee chairs were removed from their positions due to their lack of willingness to vote with the party (Lawrence, 2018). These were particularly egregious cases and the power to override the seniority system was used incredibly sparingly for the rest of the era of Democratic dominance in the House. For what amounted to a fairly small check on committee power relative to the reforms enacted by Republicans in the 1990's, the effects were substantial. Wright (2000) finds that, following reform, committee chairs voted more in line with the median member of the party than had previously been the case. Given that partisan voting is punished at the ballot box by voters (Canes-Wrone et al., 2002; Carson et al., 2010), I predict that this change in behavior by committee chairs will correspond with a decrease in their vote share.

- **Hypothesis 1:** Committee chairs will receive lower vote shares post 1970's committee reform.

Support for Hypothesis 1 would demonstrate that even relatively mild institutional restraints placed on committee chairs in an era before the rise of partisanship will induce behavior that is electorally detrimental. With the switch to a loyalty based system in 1994, the Republicans placed constraints on their chairs that was far more restrictive than that of their Democratic counterparts. The Republican leadership expected loyalty from their committee chairs, and they went about doing this in a number of ways.

For Republican leadership seniority isn't completely ignored, only mostly ignored. According to Deering and Wahlbeck (2006), seniority gets a member their foot in the door. Members with seniority are often interviewed by the Republican Steering Committee. However, once interviewed,

seniority plays no more role in the process. They find that the decision is made based on a members party loyalty and financial contributions.

In addition to their reliance on members who are more loyal, Republican party leadership plays a more active role in inserting themselves into the committee process than the Democrats had previously (Deering and Smith, 1997; Evans, 2001). Specifically, party leadership intervenes most on issues that are minority party messaging points, which are issues that make the minority party look good, the majority party look bad, or both (Evans, 2001). Notice that these issues are the same kind that Bovitz and Carson (2006) might expect to be electorally costly.

Finally, overt threats by leadership became more common. One such quote from former whip and Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert states, “The chairs will deliver on the leadership’s agenda, because they know that if they fail, they won’t be chairs anymore.” These kind of threats combined with the tendency to remove under-performing chairs represents a threat to chairs that is far more credible than any the Democrats ever offered up to their own chairs.

Given these stricter constraints by the party, we should see a similar, but more extreme phenomena than the one seen in the post-reform era. However, it could be that the electoral punishment is already built in given that members are selected on the basis of loyalty. I do not think that this is the case. For this to be true, chairs would have to be perfectly loyal already or the party leadership would have to be content with the current behavior of a soon to be appointed chair. The mere fact that Republican leadership constrains their chairs in the way that they do signals that they are not content with the loyalty of the committee chairs.

If we think of members as single-minded seekers of re-election (Mayhew, 1974), then we would expect that members would take votes they believed to be most advantageous given that individual votes can have a negative effect on electoral outcomes (Nyhan et al., 2012; Bovitz and Carson, 2006). Since the party leadership takes a much more active role in the committee process (Deering and Smith, 1997; Evans, 2001), and actively constrains chairs, even more so than Democrats, we can conclude that leadership is making chairs do things that they do not necessarily want to do. This provides evidence that even chairs selected on the basis of loyalty are not perfectly loyal to the party line upon selection or else these actions would not be necessary. As such, I expect that chairs should become more loyal upon appointment and be appropriately punished by the electorate.

- **Hypothesis 2A:** Committee chairs under a loyalty-selection system should show higher loyalty than representatives in similar districts who are not chairs.
- **Hypothesis 2B:** Committee chairs under a loyalty-selection system should show a decreased vote share relative to representatives in similar districts.

What does a decreased vote share mean? Potentially nothing if the members that are selected as committee chairs due to loyalty are more loyal because they are in a safe district. In what is a simple test yet illustrative test, Becker and Moscardelli (2008) find that the average two party vote share in 2004 for members who would go on to be Democratic chairs in 2007 was 75%. In contrast the average two party vote share of the Republicans who would become committee chairs in 2005 was 68.7%. They theorize that this is because members with seniority are by definition the safest members as these are members who repeatedly win re-election. If members under a loyalty system are less electorally secure then they should be less equipped to handle an electoral penalty, such as we saw with Pete Sessions.

## DATA AND METHODS

To analyze the effect that being a committee chair has on party loyalty and electoral outcomes, I compiled a dataset from four separate sources. For committee membership data I used data from Nelson (2010) as well as data collected by Charles Stewart for the more recent Congresses (Stewart III, 2012). Together these data sets contain committee membership, committee seniority, a members position on a committee, and member information for all members of Congress between the 80th and present day. To assess the effects of membership in the treatment group I utilize data from Lewis et al. (2018). Finally to assess electoral effects I utilize election data from Gary Jacobson (Jacobson, 2015). This data contains election results by district for both the district level race and the presidential race in that district. It also has information on the quality of the challenger as well as Democratic and Republican expenditures.

To evaluate my first hypothesis that committee chairs do worse electorally following reform in the 94th Congress I use an OLS regression. I limit my data to Democrats from the 86th Congress through the 102nd Congress. I chose those years because I think they best encapsulate the textbook Congress era as that spans from 1959-1993. I omit the 103rd Congress given that the election following said Congress saw the Democrats lose the chamber, and I believe that this bad showing by the Democrats overall may bias towards a positive finding. The dependent variable in this analysis is the percent of the two-party vote share each member received in the election following their participation in a given Congress. The main independent variable is an interaction between two dummy variables. The first is a variable that is coded 1 if the election takes place after the 94th Congress and 0 otherwise. The second is a variable that is coded as 1 if the member is a committee chair and 0 otherwise.

I also included a few control variables in my analysis of my first hypothesis. There is an adjusted measure of presidential performance in each district. This measure is the difference between the Democratic presidential candidates district level performance and their national performance. It is coded so that a positive number indicates a president outperformed their national vote share in

that district. This is to account for the varying quality of presidential candidates. Also included are a measure of challenger quality which is a dummy variable indicating whether a candidate has held previous elected office, a dummy variable for southern states, a variable indicating whether there is an incumbent running, and finally a variable indicating if the chair retired after that session.

The test of both parts of my second hypotheses are identical in every way except for the dependent variable. The data used here is all Republicans from the 104th Congress to the 113th Congress with the exception of the 110th and 111th Democratically controlled Congresses. The dependent variable for the first part of my second hypothesis is the z-score of a members party unity score. I use the z-score instead of just the party unity because high within party homogeneity makes it difficult to differentiate between the base party unity scores. The dependent variable for the second part of my second hypothesis is a members two-party Republican vote share.

The second hypothesis is also tested using an OLS regression, however the data are pre-processed by first being passed through a matching algorithm to match chairs and non-chairs from similar districts. Matching was done using the MatchIt package in R created by Kosuke Imai. The method used for matching was nearest neighbor matching with sub-classification to account for different time variation. I matched only on district characteristics such as adjusted vote share of the Democratic presidential candidate, whether an incumbent occupied the seat, the existence of a quality challenger, whether the district was redistricted since last election, Republican campaign expenditures, and whether there was a challenger in the previous election. I do not match on individual member characteristics such as seniority. I elected to do it this way for theoretical reasons, mainly that the theory and hypothesis deal with loyalty and vote share in relation to members in similar districts, not members who are themselves similar. After matching on the aforementioned district characteristics, I run a model where I include a control for a member's seniority on their committee and also a control variable denoting if a committee chair retired after that Congress. The primary independent variable for both of these models is a three level factor variable denoting not only chair status but also committee type. I divide committee chairs into two categories: chairs of constituency committees and chairs of all other committees. I am using constituency committees as defined by Deering and Smith (1997). These are committees that could potentially benefit the chair electorally because the subject matter of the committee is such that it will benefit their constituents more than other committees.



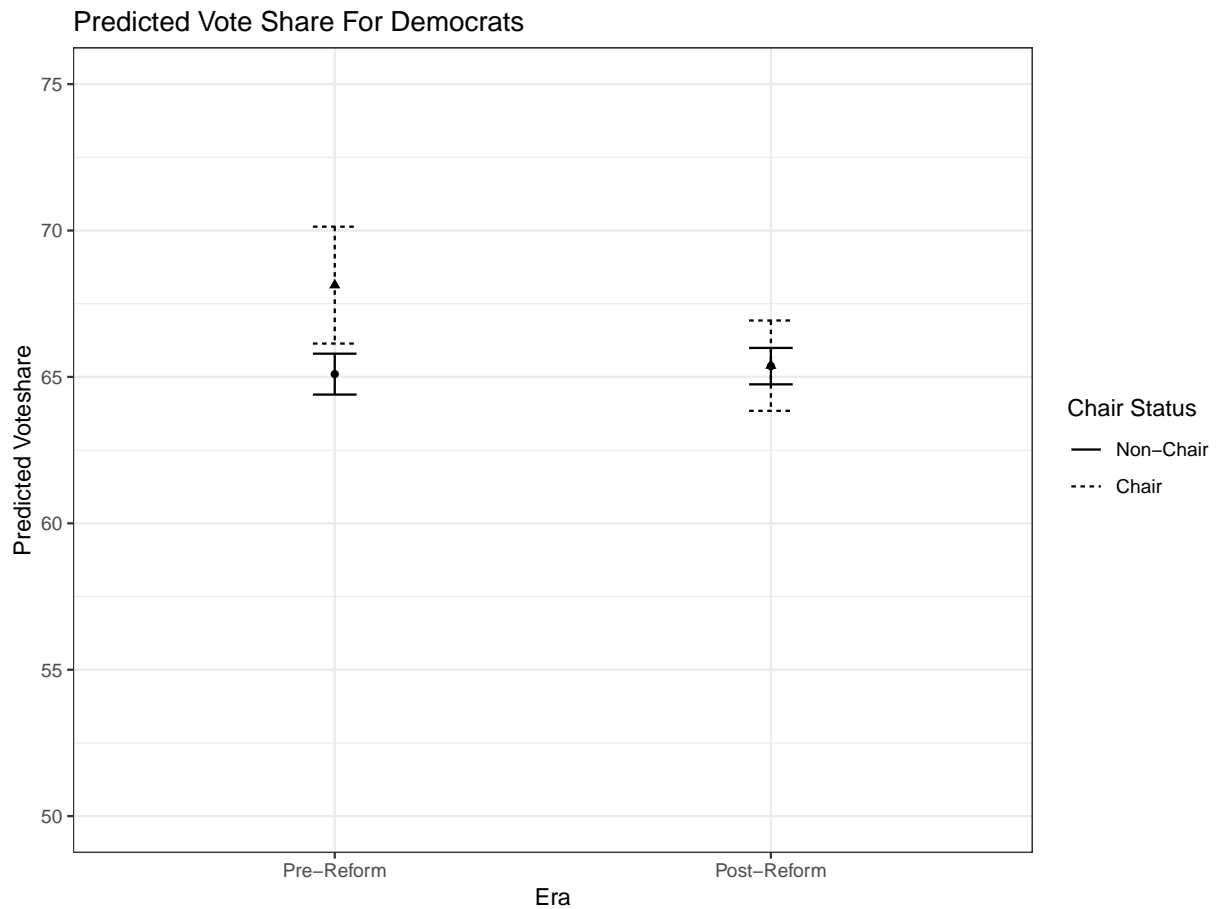
## RESULTS

### Hypothesis 1

The results for the analysis on hypothesis 1 are in table 1. I find support for my hypothesis that committee chairs receive lower vote shares post 1970's committee reform than they did before. I find significant and negative effects on the vote share of committee chairs post-reform. The effect is large enough that it eliminates any electoral benefit that comes from holding that position. Prior to committee reform the chairs could expect to have about a 3% higher vote share than non chairs. Following reform this electoral benefit ceases to exist. Figure 1 shows the predicted vote share of chairs and non-chairs pre and post reform with 95% confidence intervals. Here we have strong evidence that a relatively small institutional change designed to instill loyalty in the committee chairs succeeded, and as a result hurt the electoral prospects of the chairs.

The implications of this finding alone are noteworthy. Here we have clear evidence that when holding district factors constant, committee chairs in the pre-1974 era had a clear electoral advantage over rank-and-file members. Following the rule changes in the early 70's where the autonomy of the chairs was limited by the Democratic caucus we see not just a reduction, but the complete elimination of any kind of electoral benefit. This doesn't appear to be a case of lower vote share in elections for all Democrats either as there is no change in the predicted vote share for non-chairs. Instead, we have evidence that rule changes within Congress can have very real electoral consequences for the members whom they effect. Further, given that a result of the committee reforms of the 1970's was to increase committee chair loyalty (Wright, 2000), this finding lends support to previous work such as Canes-Wrone et al. (2002) and Carson et al. (2010) who find that members of Congress face an electoral penalty for party loyalty.

Figure 1: Electoral Effects of Committee Reform



*Note: Predicted percentage of the two-party vote for members of the Democratic party between the 86th and 102nd Congresses. Pre-reform is defined as pre-1974 and post-reform is post-1974. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.*

Table 1: Electoral Effects of Committee Reform

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Vote share
Post-Reform	−0.070 (0.286)
Chair	3.040* (1.005)
Adjusted Presidential Vote	0.499* (0.012)
Quality Challenger	−5.403* (0.348)
South	3.329* (0.319)
Incumbent Seat	8.769* (0.451)
Chair Retirement	0.720 (1.727)
Post-Reform:Chair	−3.024* (1.219)
Constant	53.965* (0.478)
Observations	4,470
R <sup>2</sup>	0.378
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.377
Residual Std. Error	8.930 (df = 4461)
F Statistic	338.659* (df = 8; 4461)

*Note: Coefficients are obtained using ordinary least squares regression.*

*DV is the percent of the two-party vote that a candidate received.*

*Post-Reform is a dummy variable which is coded as 1 when the election was post-1974.*

\*p<0.05

## Hypothesis 2A

I find mixed support for hypothesis 2A which says that committee chairs under a loyalty-selection system will show higher loyalty than representatives in similar districts who are not chairs. The results of the regression which was run after matching are presented in table 2, and a visualization of the results is available in figure 2. What I find is that after matching on district characteristics, committee chairs that represent committees that are not focused on constituency service do exhibit higher levels of party unity than the rank-and-file. However, when looking at the committee chairs who represent committees that have a focus on serving a members constituency the same effect is not found.

The reason for the difference in loyalty between committee chairs who serve on constituency committees and those who serve on all other committees could be due to the difference in the types of issues that the different committees deal with. It could also be a question of party pressure. It is possible that party leadership might take a more active role in legislation coming out of Ways and Means or Financial Services as opposed to Veterans Affairs. One last thing to note is that while this test shows that a subset of committee chairs exhibit greater loyalty than the rank-and-file, I cannot make a claim about whether these members became more loyal after becoming a committee chair or if they were selected specifically because they are more loyal.

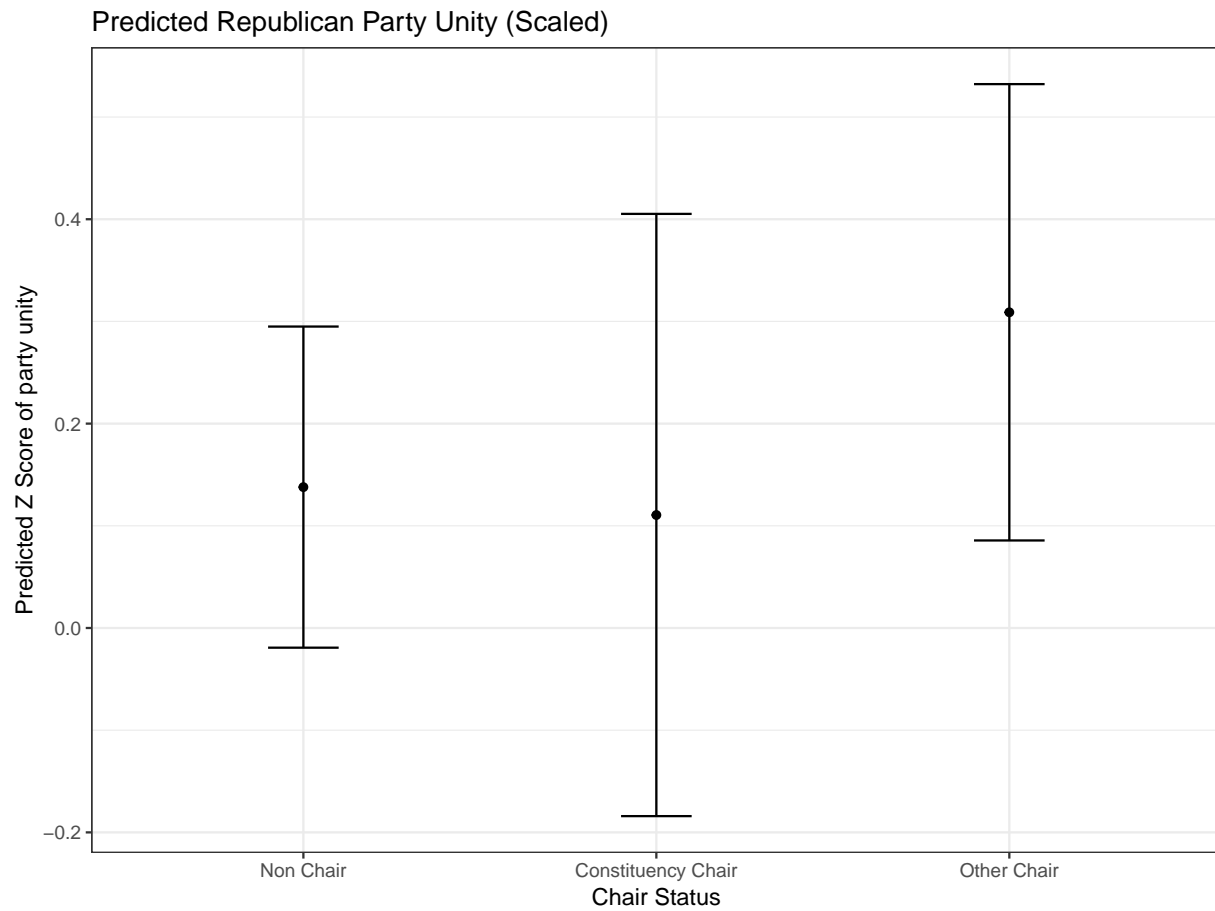
Table 2: Committee Chairs and Party Unity

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Party Unity (Scaled)
Constituency Chair	0.116 (0.158)
Other Chair	0.262* (0.112)
Committee Seniority	-0.031* (0.013)
Chair Retirement	-0.156 (0.205)
Constant	0.258* (0.086)
Observations	126
R <sup>2</sup>	0.071
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.041
Residual Std. Error	0.540 (df = 121)
F Statistic	2.322 (df = 4; 121)

*Note: Coefficients are the result of ordinary least squares regression run after matching on district characteristics. The dependent variable variable is a member's party unity score scaled within each Congress.*

\*p<0.05

Figure 2: Committee Chairs and Party Unity



*Note: Predicted party unity z score for members of the Republican party between the 104th and 113th Congresses with the exception of the 110th and 111th. Committee types are split using definitions provided by Deering and Smith (1997). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.*

## Hypothesis 2B

Hypothesis 2B says that committee chairs under a loyalty-selection system should show a decreased vote share relative to representatives in similar districts. I find no support for this hypothesis. In fact, figure 3 suggests there is some evidence that chairs of constituency committees might get a boost in elections. The results of the regression can be found in table 3. The only significant result shows that Republicans do worse in districts in which a chair had retired at the end of the session. This is likely just the result of the race being an open seat and likely more competitive. Given that the Republican chairs are term limited and more likely to retire at the end of the term (Reynolds, 2017) this could indicate a rather large downside for Republican leaderships policy of term limiting their chairs.

In some ways the lack of any effect for non-constituency committee chairs is in and of itself interesting. Conventional wisdom might say that committee chairs should do better than other members of Congress located in similar districts because of advantages that come with being a chair. Instead, I have found that there is no electoral benefit for being a committee chair. The one caveat to this is that there is suggestive but not significant evidence that chairs representing constituency oriented committees might do better. When taken in tandem with the findings from earlier that show committee chairs losing any electoral benefit following the committee reforms of the 1970's we get a picture that suggests that chairs are being punished but that this punishment seems to be balanced out by other benefits that come from being the chair of a committee.

Table 3: The Electoral Effects from Being a Committee Chair

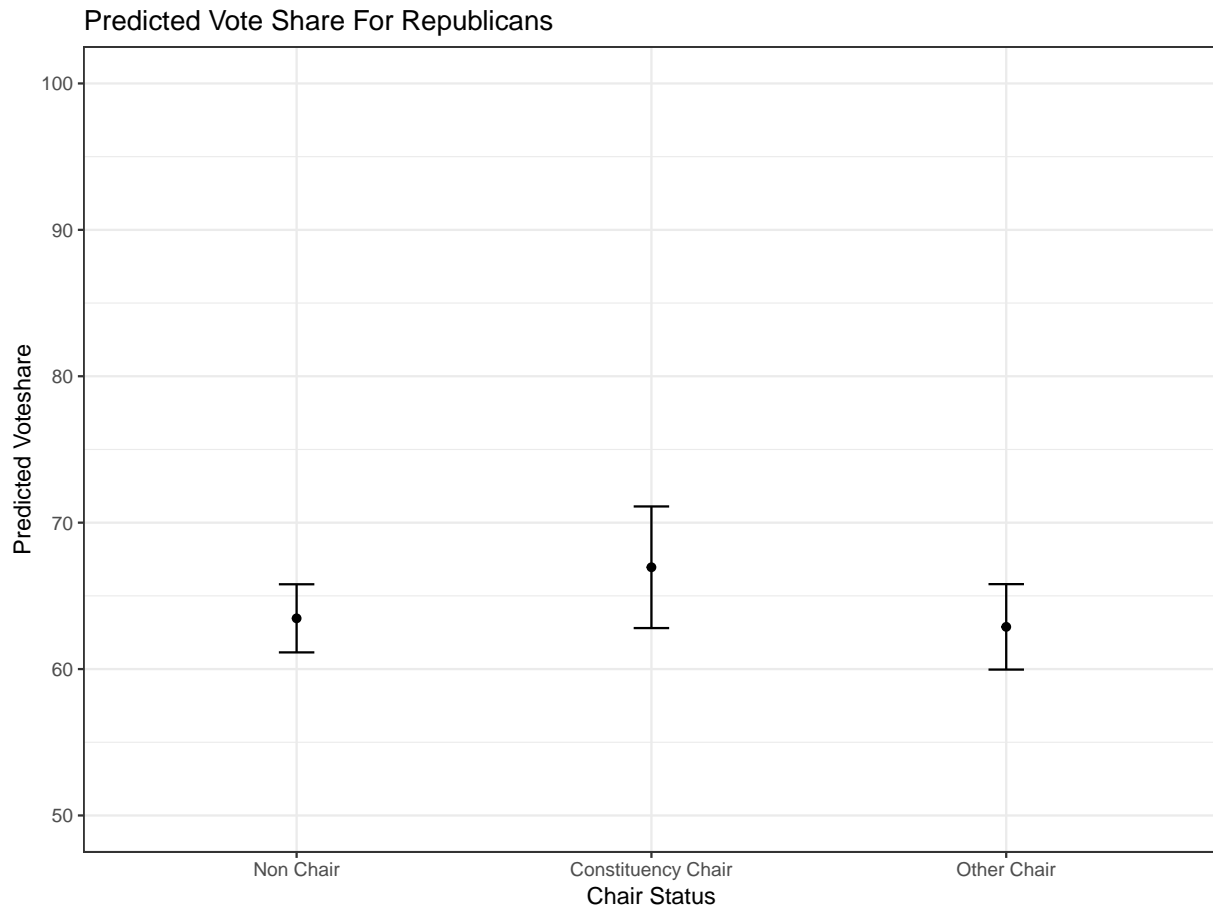
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Voteshare
Constituency Chair	2.956 (2.479)
Other Chair	−0.890 (1.689)
Committee Seniority	0.114 (0.221)
Constant	63.071* (1.284)
Observations	144
R <sup>2</sup>	0.024
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.003
Residual Std. Error	8.731 (df = 140)
F Statistic	1.140 (df = 3; 140)

*Note: Coefficients are the result of ordinary least squares regression run after matching on district characteristics. The dependent variable is the percent of the two-party vote that a member received.*

\*p<0.05



Figure 3: The Electoral Effects from Being a Committee Chair



*Note: Predicted percentage of the two party vote for members of the Republican party between the 104th and 113th Congresses with the exception of the 110th and 111th. Committee types are split using definitions provided by (Deering and Smith, 1997) . Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.*

## DISCUSSION

The results of this analysis have some interesting implications. Significant findings for the first hypothesis show the erasure of any electoral benefit following the reforms of the 94th Congress. When taken in conjunction with findings by Wright (2000) that show the increase in loyalty for committee chairs during this same time period I show evidence in support of findings by Canes-Wrone et al. (2002) and Carson et al. (2010) that party loyalty is penalized at the ballot box. Additionally, there is evidence that when compared to members in similar districts committee chairs have higher party unity.

The lack of significant findings for the final hypothesis is interesting given the results of the two preceding ones. There are a couple of potential explanations here that might merit further investigation. It could be due to the fact that committee chairs wield more power than regular members, and as such they are able to bring extra benefits to their constituents that would mitigate any loyalty punishment. Alternatively, due to the use of a scaled measure of party unity instead of just the flat measure to analyze loyalty it could be that the actual substantive differences in loyalty are too small to elicit any sort of punishment.

Ultimately these results show that the Republican strategy of inducing loyalty in their committee chairs works quite well, at least as measured here. Their chairs are more loyal than rank and file Republican members, and are not punished for being so. Whether this strategy translates to better outcomes for the party would be an interesting thread to pursue in the future as Volden and Wiseman (2017) show that chairs under Republican term limits are less effective than Democratic chairs, but at least electorally the chairs are not facing any punishment.

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